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E.O. 12958: N/A
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SUBJECT: SNAPSHOT: ISLAM IN BARBADOS

¶1. (sbu) Summary: Local Islamic community leader Suleiman Bulbulia used an introductory call on emboffs September 17 to provide a broad overview of Barbados' Islamic community. Describing this small community as "orthodox, but not fundamentalist," Bulbulia looked forward to developing a deeper relationship between Muslims in the eastern Caribbean and the USG. The Embassy's upcoming inaugural iftar was particularly appreciated, and should serve as an excellent platform for increasing engagement with Islamic communities on America's "third border". End summary.

¶2. (sbu) In his initial meeting with recently-arrived emboff, Suleiman Bulbulia, head of the Barbados Muslim Society, described a small, well-integrated Islamic community working in relative harmony with other faiths and striving to build greater cohesiveness as a religion across the islands of the eastern Caribbean. He noted that Trinidad and Tobago, with its proportionally larger Muslim population remains the center of gravity for Caribbean Islam.

¶3. (sbu) Despite the community's small size (only about 2,500 adherents), there are still factional issues. Most of Barbados' Muslims are first or second-generation immigrants from South Asia (known locally as "Indians" regardless of country of origin), but there is also a small sub-group of native-born Barbadians whose families have converted to Islam, and Bulbulia admitted tensions existed between the groups, though for cultural, rather than religious, reasons. From this community, Bulbulia said Barbados sends about 20-30 Hajjis every year, with most of them being repeat travelers combining Haj with family visits in South Asia.

¶4. (sbu) Bulbulia described Islam in Barbados as "orthodox, but not fundamentalist," noting that Muslim leaders in Bridgetown reject and actively oppose all forms of radical Islam as antithetical to the main teachings of the religion. He added that the island's community is only loosely organized, with four mosques (three "true" mosques and a teaching center) all operating mostly independently, with only ad hoc consultation on matters of common religious instance - no ulema council or formal hierarchy exists on the island. He noted that the Barbados Islamic community has some contacts with Islamic communities in other eastern Caribbean islands, but said attempts to regularize contacts through, e.g., annual conferences, remained at a loose "planning" stage.

5.. (sbu) Bulbulia said the GOB initiated in 2005 an interfaith advisory committee that met semi-regularly and brought in leaders from the Islamic, Jewish, Hindu, Catholic, Anglican, and other Christian denominational communities for advice and consultations. He said the body worked well, and was a welcome initiative by the GOB to demonstrate inclusivity and tolerance. HE also noted that the GOB had recently instituted a "national prayer" for its national day, giving each faith the opportunity to participate in national

day events - another welcome initiative.

¶6. (sbu) Outside the committee, Bulbulia admitted there were still individual church leaders who expressed intolerance, but said it was a rarity and did not affect the overall good interfaith relations on the island. He said there were also isolated incidents of harassment of Muslims, especially those wearing traditional garments, which he said was an unfortunate "backlash" consequence of the damage radical Islam had done to the religion's reputation.

¶7. (sbu) Comment: Bulbulia is a good Embassy contact, and has worked with us in the past, most recently as a representative speaker for the Islamic community at our 9/11 program. He appeared eager to increase the amount of interaction between the community and the Embassy, and was careful to hit all the right buzzwords in his initial meeting with our new staff. The Embassy's first-ever iftar, planned for September 25 and to include representatives from Islamic communities throughout the eastern Caribbean, will provide an excellent launching pad for increased engagement with the region's Muslims.

FISHER